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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to obtain information on the attitudes held by corporate executives and college professors toward the importance of proposal writing ability. Based on a survey of executives and professors, an inspection of the literature on proposal writing, and informal conversations with business executives and former students, it is concluded that proposal writing should be taught. The study concludes with suggestions for developing courses on proposal writing in schools of business and for developing units on proposal writing for courses in business writing and communication. (RB)

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THE FIRST FOUR ARTICLES in this issue provide a survey of the history and development of administrative communication. They were presented to the special interest group in organizational communication at the national meeting of the Academy of Management at Boston, August, 1973.

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The author of this article discusses the unfortunate lack of attention paid to the teaching of proposal writing and then offers his suggestions for overcoming this deficiency in schools of business and in courses in business writing and communication.

PROPOSAL WRITING—A Neglected Area of Instruction

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PROPOSAL WRITING has received a minimum of attention in collegiate report writing or research methodology textbooks. Many such textbooks do not present proposal writing as a special report type at all; others devote a minor chapter or section to it. But only in rare instances are illustrative proposals provided, and those that are provided are usually short, simple proposals covering only a few of the possible sections to be found in typical proposals.

It seems to me that not only has the cart been placed before the horse, but that all too often the horse is not even in sight. All reports must have their origin in the recognition of a problem or a need. Normally, with the exception of routine periodic reports, and reports by edict from higher authority, these problems or needs precipitate a proposal for action to alleviate the aggravation. If a proposed course of action is approved, research or appropriate action is taken. Finally comes the ultimate report. But most textbooks bring the student into the picture during the data collection or final writing stages.

A look backward at the origin of most research reports will reveal that they resulted from proposals being written by someone and accepted by someone. An exception, of course, is to be found in those who initiate projects themselves at their own expense. Suffice it to say that there are few professional people in any field who will give their time, effort, and money to finance significant research projects.

Gerald R. Smith, writing in *Library Trends*, has said:

> Proposal preparation, or the art of grantmanship, as it is sometimes called, is only a means to an end and while it is sometimes scorned by those who would be about the business of research, such scorn is partly the result of a misconception of proposal writing as a process completely detached from the process of research. This viewpoint is short-sighted since it emphasizes the selling of an idea rather than the generation and development of an idea. It often results in a hastily drawn proposal which offers little likelihood of obtaining support. By way of contrast, the preparation of the proposal can be thought of as the initial planning step in the research process, which, if done well, will not only enhance one's chances of getting the cold cash but will also improve the quality of the research.[1]

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The reader is urged to read again the last sentence of the quotation. It succinctly and significantly points out the two main reasons why research proposals are written. The researcher needs approval or funding before he can set about solving a problem and the planning necessitated by the need to prepare a proposal forces the researcher to critically think through every aspect of his proposed research project, significantly and materially improving the quality of the ultimate research and final report.

What about the proposal as a sales document? Out there somewhere beyond the walls of the ivory towers imprisoning research-minded, staid professors is the harsh world of reality in which business functions. As competition intensifies and business firms grow larger, the solicitation of business contracts (production or service) becomes a major item of concern. Government agencies, industrial firms, and other assorted organizations normally award business contracts on the basis of written proposals (bids), sometimes solicited, sometimes not. Thus the proposal in this instance is truly a sales document, persuasive to a degree but depending heavily on its factual information for its competitive success.

And what about the multitudinous problems within a business firm? Kress and Patty, although not writing specifically about proposal preparation, nevertheless point figurative fingers at the need for such training when they write:

> The ability of both small and large business firms to grow (or even survive) depends to a large extent on their managers or leaders having access to the necessary facts for successful decision making. These managers must be able to gather these data themselves, or be able to intelligently evaluate the data presented to them by other individuals.
>
> Too few business curricula provide education to business students that recognizes the value of business research. . .[2]

Managers at all levels need the ability to isolate problems, define them, hypothesize about them, determine procedures whereby the problems may be solved, crystallize the benefits to be derived from solving the problems, determine costs of solution, *ad infinitum*. In short, they need the ability to prepare written proposals for someone else's evaluation and acceptance or rejection. Too, they need the ability to effectively evaluate proposals submitted to them by their own subordinates or peers.

Survey of Corporate Executives

To obtain some inkling of the feeling held by corporate officers with regard to the importance of proposal writing ability, I have

just completed a mail survey of 50 randomly selected manufacturing firms scattered throughout the United States. The only requirement in selecting these firms was that they be in the $1 million minimum sales volume per year bracket. Otherwise, the companies have nothing particularly in common other than that they are manufacturers.

Among other things, the chief executive officer was asked to rate the importance—crucial, great, average, minor, or none— in relation to the majority of executives in the firm of the ability to write technical/business proposals of both an intracompany and intercompany nature. In either case the number of executive officers reporting "great" or "crucial" exceeded 50 per cent. Sixty-five per cent of these officers reported that proposals play an important part in the operations of their firms.

Survey of AACSB Professors

At the same time that business executives were surveyed, a survey of collegiate teachers of business communication was made. Questionnaires were sent to those teaching in universities belonging to the AACSB. Replies were received from 116 professors. Thirty-eight (32.7%) of these teachers believed that a course in writing business and technical proposals (separate from other courses) is important enough for business majors to be offered as a distinct course in the School of Business. When asked "Are students in your college who take only the business communication courses called for in the core curriculum given what you would consider any signficant amount of instruction in proposal writing?" only 21 teachers said "yes." Professors were asked to rate their opinion of the value to business students of a course in proposal writing. Forty-four per cent rated it as either moderately beneficial or very beneficial.

One can only surmise what the response would have been had opinion been expressed about *units* on proposal writing rather than *full-length courses*. But it seems logical to assume that percentages would have been much higher.

Need for Training in Proposal Writing

An inspection of the literature reveals that a considerable amount of writing has been done in educational and trade journals, pamphlets, etc., with regard to proposal writing. A review of this material further reveals that most of it is written either for the educator seeking funding or the engineer who must prepare technical proposals. A number of textbooks also have short chapters or sections

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or a paragraph or two devoted to proposal writing—but again aimed invariably at the technical proposal writer. Most of the books emphasizing to any significant degree proposal writing are those used in the technical field rather than in business or education.

The dearth of instructional material dealing with the subject of proposal writing means the burden of seeing that such instruction is provided falls entirely on the instructor. An examination of currently used textbooks in business communication, business report writing, Principles of Management, Principles of Marketing, and even Research in Business reveals little or no mention of proposal writing.

Hypotheses

Based upon a review of much of the literature in the field, the survey previously mentioned, informal conversations with business executives and former students, and personal experiences in teaching proposal writing aspects of business research, I offer the following hypotheses:

1. Proposal writing is a neglected instructional area in collegiate undergraduate training in all areas of education for business, including preparation for business teaching.
2. The extent to which the typical businessman and businesswoman will be concerned with proposals—either as writer or evaluator—is not known, and therefore not appreciated as an area of instruction, by a majority of those who teach courses wherein such instruction could logically be implemented.
3. To the extent that collegiate business educators do think about proposal writing, these thoughts are associated with funding for educational proposals and contract-seeking proposals by defense-related firms and other scientific organizations.
4. There is a need to create a conceptual framework upon which a student can hang concepts and hypotheses about proposal writing and within which he can secure practical experience.
5. There is a need at the undergraduate level to provide experiences whereby education for business students may develop the ability to *plan* for and to carry on valid research.
6. There is a need at the undergraduate level to provide experiences whereby education for business students may develop the ability to evaluate research *plans* and completed research reports *of others*.
7. There is a need at the undergraduate level to provide informa-

tion and to stimulate discussion whereby education for business students may better understand and appreciate the need for and value of a knowledge of proposal writing techniques.

8. Training in proposal writing will upgrade the quality of research conducted by a student.
9. Training in proposal writing will result in a student being a more critical reader.
10. Training in proposal writing will result in the general improvement of the student's writing ability, in his intuitive and analytical thinking abilities, in his research ability, and in his ability to understand the limitations that time, money, skills, and bias impose on research-related activities.

I recommend that teachers in business communication departments (or possibly teachers in departments of marketing and management) give serious thought to the offering of a special course in proposal writing. And if this is not feasible, to give even more serious thought to developing a unit of instruction to be used within the framework of existing courses (*e.g.*, Business Report Writing, Research Methodology), such unit to involve as many days as is possible to allot to this topic.

Expected Contribution

Proposals, both solicited and unsolicited, play a major role in society today. They are of increasing importance in business, in industry, in education, and in government. Our expanding technology is largely responsible for the present emphasis upon proposals and other kinds of business writing and for the greater emphasis to come. Proposals—a specific kind of report—represent a significant part of the report writing scene. Although generally conceded to be difficult to teach, once a unit is developed it can be used for some time in a specific course without losing its educational value. Also, it can be used in special workshops, seminars, and other meetings where people want to learn something about the mechanics and theory of writing proposals.

Objectives of Proposal Unit

A. The student who has completed this unit should have increased his knowledge and skills to enable him to:
   1. Adapt a model proposal to the specific guidelines of the particular program under which support or approval is sought.

2. Articulate the various types of proposals and the purposes, similarities, and dissimilarities of each, and identify the major components of a research proposal, their function and criteria.
3. Evaluate his own proposals in terms of their potential success in gaining acceptance, as well as in terms of "correct" writing.
4. Prepare individual-initiated proposals that contain most of the standard parts of proposals and are superior examples of effective written communication techniques.
5. Think creatively, analytically, intuitively.
6. Organize his thoughts logically, interestingly, and persuasively.
7. State problems and hypotheses in terms intelligible to those who are not sophisticated in the area of proposed research.
8. Use intelligently the vocabulary relevant to proposals.
9. Read proposals and abstracts of research studies with understanding.
10. Acquire an elementary knowledge of sampling techniques, statistical tools, and questionnaire construction useful to the proposal writer.
11. Increase his ability to read comprehendingly, identify weaknesses, and interpret intelligently proposals written by others and to indicate changes required for the proposal to become acceptable.
12. Appreciate the relationship between proposals and successful research projects; to develop a realization that the solution to a problem is normally preceded by a recognition of the problem and a "blueprint for action."
13. Use the library more effectively.

B. The student who has completed the unit on proposal writing should have increased his understanding and appreciation of:

1. The nature and function of proposals
2. The types and kinds of proposals
3. The importance of adhering to all principles of effective communication in writing proposals
4. The role of proposals in the world of business, as well as in the technological and educational spheres
5. The unique attributes of proposals and the elements and procedures required by such reports
6. The duties and responsibilities of those who prepare proposals

7. The difference between a research plan, *per se*, and a proposal
8. The difference in scope and degree of complexity which necessitates individualizing each proposal
9. The complexity of articulating probable procedures, available facilities, personnel, time schedules, estimated costs, etc., into a believable, persuasive, factual, executable, interesting, attractive, and grammatically correct document that will "sell" its reader
10. The necessity for varying the form of proposals in line with their complexity, their length, and the readers for whom they are intended.

C. The student who has completed the unit on proposal writing will have developed such attitudes as the following:

1. Recognition of the important function proposals perform in facilitating research, problem solving, and general business activity
2. Recognition that proposals play an important role in various aspects of business, social, civic, political, and personal life
3. Recognition of both the opportunities and responsibilities of the individual as a proposal writer and researcher
4. Awareness of the magnitude of proposal writing, to which he has had only a brief introduction, and the development of a desire to learn more about proposal writing and to become more proficient in this aspect of communication
5. Recognition of the contribution that proposals have made to the advancement of knowledge, the furtherance of business activity, and the solution of all kinds of problems in business management, science, education, and other areas
6. Appreciation of the wisdom of thorough investigation, thought, and organization before writing and submitting proposals
7. Appreciation that the principles and techniques essential to acceptably-written proposals are also applicable to other forms of communication in which a writer must engage
8. Appreciation that not all proposals, even though well-written, can be accepted and that, like writing for publication, a certain number of rejections must be counted on—taken in stride, as it were—by those who would initiate ideas for research activity
9. Recognition that comprehensive, detailed proposals serve as a

blueprint or guideline for the research activity, enabling the researcher to "stay on course toward his objective"; that they are not punishments exacted by an unforgiving deity for a lifetime of sin.

Possible Student Activities

A few possible activities are suggested here. The number of activities assigned to any one student will depend, of course, upon how much time and emphasis the instructor wishes to devote to this unit.

1. Collect or develop, duplicate, and distribute to members of the class illustrative proposals preferably assorted as to kind. Ask students to prepare written evaluations and, acting in the role of reviewer, be ready to react orally to the proposals if called upon. Allow several days for preparation of the assignment.
2. Have students collect specimen proposals from business firms or other agencies. These can possibly be discussed in class if time permits. Otherwise, students may be asked to critique them.
3. Have students read several research reports which are not already abstracted. Ask them to synthesize these reports in the form of either a descriptive or informative abstract.
4. Prepare, duplicate, and distribute copies of a bibliography on proposal writing to students and have each of them write a report on the topic "Writing Effective Proposals."
5. Make library assignments that force students to use a wide variety of secondary sources of information. First, of course, provide a little information on secondary sources if the students have had a minimum of training in library usage. Each student can be given a list of questions requiring specific answers, answers that can be acquired only by locating and using various secondary sources. It is suggested that enough question sheets be prepared to enable *each* student to receive assignments different from those received by any other student. Perhaps three or four such assignments made periodically would be beneficial.
6. Prepare short written cases (a possibility is to take them from a source book) involving critical business decisions. Have students analyze these, crystalizing the real issue that needs to be further explored. Ask them to state the problem succinctly and significantly and to develop any hypotheses that they believe should be tested.
7. Divide the class into groups. Have the students in each group

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conduct library research and prepare a report which answers one question, such as:

(1) "What are the requirements for the preparation of good questionnaires?"

(2) "What are the relative merits of personal interviews, telephone interviews, observations, and mail surveys as data collection devices?"

(3) "What are the similarities and dissimilarities of writing proposals relative to education, business, science?"

8. Have selected students prepare a questionnaire to be used in a study for which a proposal is presumably being submitted. Let them make whatever assumptions they wish. Require them to duplicate and distribute to members of the class their questionnaire and a brief explanation of the assumed situation. After all students have had a chance to study the questionnaire prepared by an individual, let him defend it before the group.

9. Have students choose a problem which can be solved by experimentation and write the proposal.

10. Have students choose a problem which can be solved by the survey method and write the proposal.

11. Have students choose a problem which is related to product development, plant expansion, or some other aspect of business and write the proposal.

12. Make specific proposal writing assignments which can be classified as predictive, descriptive, methodological, philosophical, longitudinal, etc.

13. Require students to prepare a proposal which necessitates considerable creative thinking in order to work out the procedures for solving the problem.

14. Have business education majors prepare a proposal supposedly seeking funds from the U.S. Office of Education for a research project.

15. Have business education majors prepare a proposal on behalf of one business firm to be submitted to another business firm in which a manufacturing contract is sought (or a proposal for research funding to be submitted to a foundation such as Ford or Carnegie, etc.).

16. Have students write a proposal for a project to be undertaken in one of their college classes.

17. Have each student (or selected students if time does not permit every student to participate) orally present and defend before the class a proposal that he has written. Require that the proposal be duplicated and copies submitted to every class member a week before the oral defense. Also require each member of the class to prepare a written critique of the proposal.

Concluding Remarks

A unit on proposal writing, although it logically fits into business communication courses, can be introduced in any course in marketing, management, finance, etc., where students are expected to know something about research. If this instruction is not provided through business communications offerings, do not hesitate to provide such a unit in some research related course you teach.

For my own purposes I have put together a teaching unit entitled "Writing Business Proposals." Copies of it are available in certain university libraries. A list of these libraries will be sent to interested persons upon receipt of a stamped, addressed envelope.